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TAGS: PREL PGOV SW

SUBJECT: SWEDEN: POST-TSUNAMI POLITICS

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Classified By: Polcouns Casey Christensen, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (c) More than a year after the killer tsunami struck Southeast Asia, the political ripple effects in Sweden continue. A parliamentary committee is currently conducting hearings to which key members of the government, including Prime Minister Persson and Foreign Minister Freivalds, have been convoked. Persson and Freivalds will appear before the Constitution Committee of the Riksdag on February 16, seeking to justify their roles in responding to the December 26, 2004, tsunami in which 525 vacationing Swedes perished, and thousands more were harmed. The government has been accused by survivors and others of indifference and ineptitude in responding to the catastrophe.

¶2. (u) The parliamentary hearings follow the December release of a highly critical report issued by a government-appointed committee that investigated the Tsunami. The report singles out Prime Minister Persson and Foreign Minister Freivalds for particularly direct criticism. Persson is faulted for not establishing a functioning crisis management mechanism, and Freivalds for her lack of engagement and responsiveness.

¶3. (c) Following the release of the report, opposition party leaders sought but did not obtain sufficient support for a vote of no-confidence against the government. A no-confidence vote would require endorsement by all four of the center-right opposition parties, plus some defections from the Greens or the Left Party that support the Social Democrat-led government. Moderate party parliamentarian Gunilla Carlsson, who chairs the opposition's Foreign Policy Working Group, told us recently that the opposition will seek a vote of no-confidence by mid-March. Hearings on the tsunami response are expected to continue until the end of February.

¶4. (c) Comment: There is little risk that Persson will face a vote of no-confidence. Swedish law does provide, however, for a vote of no-confidence against a single minister, rather than the whole government, and there have been calls for a no-confidence vote against Foreign Minister Freivalds. Freivalds has taken the brunt of public criticism for the government's response to the Tsunami. One internet-based petition claims to have collected 39,500 signatures calling for her removal. Former Prime Minister Carl Bildt told PDAS Volker January 15 that Prime Minister Persson was using Foreign Minister Freivalds to absorb the blame for the government's perceived incompetence. Bildt said Persson would leave her in this role as long as she served the purpose of insulating him and the rest of the government, then would, if needed, cold-bloodedly cast her off. We note that over the past year Persson has resisted repeated calls for Freivalds' dismissal in connection with the Tsunami-response fiasco. As the hearings and the

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post-hearings maneuvers over a possible no-confidence vote

play out, the Prime Minister will face increasing pressure to sack Freivalds. If the opposition succeeds in keeping its own parties in line (the Center Party waffled earlier) and attracts support from the government's supporters (the Greens have publicly blamed Freivalds and hinted at possible support), Persson will face a decision concerning Freivalds' continued usefulness as a lightning rod for the Tsunami issue, which refuses to go away. On the other hand, as long as Persson, skilled politician that he is, maintains discipline among his coalition, he may retain his "lightning rod" as long as he can.

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